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DYNAMICS OF TASK AND PROCESS--THE CLASSROOM AS SOCIAL ORGANISM.

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A THEORETICAL PARADIGM FOR ANALYZING THE DYNAMICS OF TASK AND PROCESS COMPONENTS OF GROUP LIFE AS THEY ARE RELATED TO THE MANIFOLD FORCES OPERATIVE IN THE CLASSROOM IS PRESENTED. PUPILS ARE VIEWED AS MEMBERS OF A PREDOMINANTLY WORK-ORIENTED CULTURE--THE CLASSROOM. WITHIN THIS CULTURE, TWO KINDS OF CONFLICT-PRODUCING DEMANDS TO WHICH PUPILS MUST YIELD ENERGY ARE POSTULATED--INTRAPERSONAL DEMANDS AND EXTERNAL DEMANDS OF TASK, PROCESS, AND TEACHER. THE TEACHER'S ROLE IS VIEWED AS THAT OF A DIAGNOSTICIAN AND CONSULTANT FOR THE SOCIAL SYSTEM IN WHICH HE IS ALSO A PARTICIPANT. (AUTHOR)

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DYNAMICS OF TASK AND PROCESS: THE CLASSROOM AS SOCIAL ORGANISM

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Dynamics of Task and Process: The Classroom as Social Organism

Increasing recognition of factors affecting learning in the classroom, other than the purely cognitive, has become apparent in pedagogic theory and practice over the last two decades. Much theory and research has been devoted to such problems as aptitudes and their interaction with socio-environmental variables (Cronbach, 1957), the effect of student values upon learning (Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964), scholastic success and attitude toward school (Jackson & Lahaderne, 1967), differential leadership patterns and their effect upon learning social skills (White & Lippitt, 1960) and the effects of different types of classroom organization upon learning (Miller et al., 1966). Implicit in much of this research is the recognition of the classroom as a social organism with its own norms, values, roles, status positions and structures (Getzels & Thelen, 1960).

Group dynamics is a field of inquiry dedicated to achieving knowledge about the nature of groups, the laws of their development, and their interrelations with individuals, other groups and larger institutions (Cartwright & Zander, 1960). In recent years there has been a growing recognition and utilization of the contributions that group dynamics has made to understanding the special world of the classroom. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the dynamics of task and process components of group life as they are related to the manifold forces operative in the classroom.

Teacher and pupil behavior in the classroom may be viewed from several perspectives, each representing a different level of abstraction in thinking. The classroom can be thought of as a collection of pupils, each thinking his own thoughts, engaging in his own activities and for his own purposes. The classroom might be thought of as a collection of pupils organized around common interests and common methods of operation; the classroom might be viewed as a structure within the institution known as school. Finally, the classroom might be conceptualized as a culture in which forces, movements and ethical systems interact.

A teacher who observes group interaction is faced with a plethora of stimuli. His major objective should be to make progress toward understanding how interpersonal interaction teaches pupils to cope more adequately with the world in which they live. More specifically, he should make progress toward the development of a coherent body of empirical knowledge about the nature of group life, knowledge which has specific meaning for any particular kind of a group. The teacher's immediate task, however, is to understand what is going on--to make sense of the group situation. Thus the teacher's role may be seen as that of a diagnostician and consultant for a social system in which he is also a participant. His task is to continually sift and assess alternative ways to intervene--including nonintervention.

In this task the teacher is aided by some a priori view of the nature of group interaction. There are many alternative strategies for viewing group operation. The group may be seen as an interacting network of individuals in which each verbal or nonverbal exchange can be viewed as cause or effect to preceding comments and a stimulus for those to come. Or, the group might be viewed historically, as a function of past social experiences, or identifications of its members. The group may also be conceived somewhat more abstractly as the "particular state of a field of forces carried by individuals, arising out of interaction, and whose dynamic balance determines the group's stability and potentials for change" (Stock & Thelen, 1958).

The relationship between the group and the individual is complex. Clearly, group factors such as task, atmosphere and standards play an important part in stimulating, limiting and guiding behavior in the group. Just as clearly, the individual possesses personal needs and characteristics that partly determine his behavior when in a group situation. To begin to understand the complex interaction between individual and group requires a theoretical framework whose basic concepts are equally applicable to both individual and group aspects of interaction.

The methods by which individuals and groups deal with interpersonal or intrapersonal conflict are fundamental to understanding the classroom as a social organism. Conflict arises in situations where it is necessary to reconcile two or more alternatives which are perceived to be irreconcilable. Intrapersonal conflict arises when a particular behavior or course of action threatens the individual's membership in a group, real or imaginary, or

threatens his personal security. Presumably individual behavior would not be undertaken if it did not enhance membership status within a group, or reduce intrapersonal tension. Therefore, selection of a particular behavior or course of action by an individual, in a conflict situation, has to him the meaning of attempting to cope with a real or imagined conflict. In a very real sense the individual is forced to take sides with one group against the other, one individual against another, even though both may be important and valued by him.

Behavior in the classroom is significantly influenced by the teacher, but behavior of pupils, in their interaction with teacher and peers, is fundamental to resolving conflict. Outcomes of instruction are eventually determined by behavior of individuals, and the resolution of conflict is a fundamental component in human dynamics.

Given the assumption that the classroom is a problem-solving culture, four kinds of conflict-producing demands to which pupils must yield energy can be postulated. Three are external. First are the task requirements, set by the teacher, which include behaviors necessary for the completion of the task: having speculative ideas, comparing strategies of action, carrying out a proposed plan, organizing a final report, incorporating by memory or by insight bits of information or general principles, etc. The second and third demands are primarily concerned with maintenance and direction of the group. They are seen as primarily activities by groups which set the stage for the possibility of group or individual productivity. Thus the second kind of demand is a process demand; behaviors promoting group harmony, reduction of competition (but not at the expense of necessary assertiveness in meeting task demands), or preparation for active problem solving. The third demand deals with leadership and its concomitant authority. Although, ideally, direction for the operation of a class springs from the problem under investigation, society has put into each class an agent, the teacher, who may or may not take responsibility for a tasks' intrinsic directions. Whatever the case, the teacher is a potent force or source of demands in the classroom and must be dealt with by the group or individual pupils. Behavior representing conflict resolution with leadership and its concomitant authority range from dependent compliance to counter-revolution.

Pupils not only have to deal with task, peers and teacher in attempts to reduce conflict, but they must also satisfy an infinite variety of intrapersonal concerns. These concerns might be reflected in such problems as status consciousness, lack of self-esteem, uncontrolled aggression, fear of failure, etc. It is assumed that individual differences in cognitive, affective and autonomic aptitudes will facilitate or hinder the individual in his attempts to reduce internal or external conflict. It is further assumed that aptitudes interact, serving alternately as intermediary, catalyst or initiator of behavioral tendencies. In summary, personal concerns interact at various levels with external demands and in many instances may determine whether a pupil may be able to cope adaptively with external demands.

Given the four types of conflict-producing demands, mentioned above, one might be content to categorize pupils in terms of whether they are "adequately" coping with each of the types. The pupil who is engrossed in his own intrapersonal cercerns might be considered at odds with the other three demands. This is very often the case in the classroom; goals of classroom instruction are stated only in task, process and teacher terms. Categorization of individual attempts to reduce conflict is not sufficient; further research into the kinds of ways pupils or groups characteristically deal with stress caused by the interaction of process, task and intrapersonal concerns is needed.

Practical outcomes of interaction among task, process and intrapersonal concerns is reflected in the postulate that the classroom consists of two distinct cultures: one a play culture and the other a work culture. The work culture represents congruence with adult expectations for problem-solving behavior, serious consideration of teacher-imposed task demands; the play culture, on the other hand, is adverse to work and is characterized by behaviors that impede problem-solving. The tasks in the work culture are significantly different from the tasks in the play culture. The two cultures reflect differential goals, thwarting potential, role assignment, etc. Thus the means by which conflict can be reduced is significantly different for the two cultures; individual differences in participation and performance should be reflected in marked differences in pupils' attempts to reduce conflict.

In summary, the pupil is seen as a member of a predominately work-oriented culture--the classroom. Within this culture pupils are beset by two types of demands: intrapersonal demands and external demands of task, process and teacher. The demands which initiate conflict for a particular pupil may be considered his "area of concern". Pupils who direct their energies primarily to external demands, or at least maintain a certain competency in these areas, are seen as meeting the demands of the situation. Those pupils who through personal concerns cannot cope with external demands will meet these same demands with exaggerated attempts to reduce conflict. It is hoped that understanding of these dynamics will enable the teacher to a) develop insight and sensitivity to the concerns of those he teaches and b) discover and apply, depending upon his educational objectives, alternative ways of initiating, facilitating or reducing internal or external conflict.

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